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CIA tries book reviewing

WE ARE pleased that Harper & Row, the New York publishing firm, has, in spite of strong objections from the Central Intelligence Agency, (CIA), decided to publish without change a book on narcotics traffic in Southeast Asia.

The book, by Alfred W. McCoy, is entitled, "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia." It is highly critical of the CIA's efforts to suppress opium production and smuggling in South Vietnam and surrounding countries.

In fact, Mr. McCoy argues, according to a Washington Post report on the manuscript, that "American diplomats and secret agents have been involved in the narcotics traffic at three levels" — coincidental complicity by allying with groups engaged in drug trafficking; abetting trafficking by covering up for Southeast Asian traffickers; and active engagement "in the transport of opium and heroin."

It is unfortunate, however, that Harper & Row officials complied with a CIA demand that it be allowed to review the manuscript before publication.

The CIA verdict on the book was that it would do a "disservice" to the fight against narcotics traffic in Southeast Asia. A Harper & Row spokesman said the CIA had contended that it would "prove beyond doubt" that Mr. McCoy's facts were wrong. The spokesman added, "They (the CIA) just didn't do it."

It is understandable that, as the Harper & Row official put it, "the industry has been very cautious on things like this ever since the Clifford Irving story broke." But there were other ways the publisher could have verified the McCoy research; it could have, for example, put one

of its own staff members on a spot-check verification of some of McCoy's primary sources.

The book, to be published Aug. 17, will be important and much-debated.

Also in need of debate and public clarification are the implications for free and responsible speech raised when publishers allow governmental agencies — particularly when those agencies are criticized in the publications — to review and comment on a manuscript before it reaches the public.